

# *apuntes*

Reflexiones teológicas desde el margen hispano

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**Spirit without Borders:  
Pentecostalism in the Americas**

*Eldin Villafañe*

**Victory Outreach International:  
A Case Study in Holistic Hispanic Ministry**

*Daniel A. Rodriguez*

**An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of  
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# *Apuntes*

## *Theological Reflections from the Hispanic margin*

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## From the Editor

Some of the strongest groups presently growing in Latino/a communities are Pentecostal churches and congregations. Some denominations and Hispanic congregations see the exponential growth of Pentecostalism in Latino/a communities as a threat, while others see it as both a blessing and as a sign of God's work in these communities. Regardless of one's particular perspective on the issue, it is essential that we examine the reason for this dramatic growth of Pentecostalism among Latinos/as. Many factors have contributed to this dramatic growth and growing presence in Latin American and in North American Hispanic congregations, and in this issue, two Latino scholars explore the characteristics and traits of Pentecostalism in an attempt to better understand their success in ministry to impoverished communities, their contribution to the church, and their strong presence in the Latino/a community.

First, Dr. Eldin Villafañe, Ricardo Tañon Distinguished Professor of Hispanic Christianity, Ethics, and Urban Ministry Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston examines the origins of Pentecostalism and its key characteristics as he traces the reasons for their success in Latin American and in Latino/a communities, as well as outlining some of the challenges Pentecostal churches face in the future. Second, Dr. Daniel A. Rodriguez Assistant Professor of Religion and Hispanic Studies Religion Division, Seaver College Pepperdine University in Malibu, California examines the history and characteristics of Victory Outreach International, as well as their success in reaching the Hispanic communities, particularly in areas plagued by poverty and violence.

Another area of great importance in our churches, but one which is often ignored, is the role of women, who while playing a vital role in our churches often are doubly marginalized by oppressive conditions and sexism. Angel Santiago-Vendrell and Mi-Soon Im, two graduate students provide us with a joint paper examining the liberative feminist hermeneutics of Latin American thinkers Elza Tamez and Ivonne Gevara.

Finally, Pablo A. Jiménez brings us a review of Samuel Pagán's insightful book on the Dead Sea Scrolls, *El misterio revelado: Los rollos del Mar Muerto y la comunidad de Qumrán*.

## Spirit without Borders: Pentecostalism in the Americas (A Profile and Paradigm of “Criollo” Pentecostalism)

Eldin Villafañe

It's a big word that emerged in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and dominates the Wall Streets', Madison Avenues', and media institutions of our world - It's Globalization.

Most people perceive Globalization in economic or market terms. Although, we are fully aware that it also points to the electronic superhighway, the many people movements and the cultural, religious and social transactions across many borders. Indeed, global mobility of people, resources, ideas, faith, and systems define our contemporary world.

For me, one of the most significant areas of the globalization phenomena is stated well in a current book entitled, *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*.<sup>1</sup> I represent this faith tradition that is quintessentially a global religion—truly imbued with a Spirit without borders.

If we are to believe Christian demographer David Barrett or Vinson Synan, Pentecostals and Charismatics have grown from a hand full of believers at the beginning of the last century to a worldwide estimate of 530 million (1999) and growing!<sup>2</sup>

C. Peter Wagner, speaking about this global religion states that:

My research has led me to make this bold statement:  
'In all human history, no other non-political, non-militaristic, voluntary human movement has grown

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<sup>1</sup> Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (editors), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 1999); see also, Karla Poewe (ed.) *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 1994); Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, Inc., 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901-2001* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 372.



as rapidly as the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement in the last 25 years'.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the possible hyperbole in this remark, we must, to say the least, make some sense of this tremendous growth of Pentecostalism—a religion made to travel.

Two major questions about Pentecostalism inform my thinking, they constitute the double foci of my remarks: First, what are some of the distinguishing characteristics of Pentecostal religiosity? and second, what factors account for its phenomenal growth?

Before I respond to the above, I need to make the following clarifications: Pentecostalism is not just, as some would narrowly define, a “tongues movement”—referring to its *glossolalic* cultic expressions. Rather, as I would broadly define it, Pentecostalism is that branch of Christianity that emphasizes the power and presence of the person, work, and gifts of the Spirit. And adding Killiam MacDonell’s mission and Trinitarian note, it is “directed toward the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, world Pentecostalism is not a monolithic religious reality. Far from it, Pentecostalism, like many world religions, has taken the native garb of its historical and cultural context. It is a kaleidoscope of diverse national and local experiences.

Yet, as André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani would remind us in their book, *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*:

Despite the enormous differences, which separate these countries and the individual societies within them, Pentecostal manifestations in these diverse cultures, have many similarities. Contemporary Pentecostalism provides a striking example of the paradox of difference and uniformity that seems to be at the heart of processes of transnationalism and globalization.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Vinson Synan, *The Spirit Said 'Grow'* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1992), p.ii.

<sup>4</sup> Eldin Villafañe, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward a Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani (editors), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. back cover.

What follows will attempt to provide a profile of Pentecostalism—thus, highlighting certain salient characteristics; and provide a paradigm of its proliferation—thus, accounting for its growth. It is a somewhat bold attempt to get to the universal of global Pentecostalism by way of the particular. The particular being the “Criollo” (native or indigenous) Pentecostalism of Latin/Hispanic America.

Juan Sepúlveda provides a succinct definition of “Criollo” Pentecostalism, “as a form of popular religiosity, that is, as a religious experience strongly rooted in the popular culture and identity.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Carmelo Alvarez would add that it is “economically and structurally independent of any foreign mission, with an autonomous (native) pastoral ministry.”<sup>7</sup> “Criollo” Pentecostalism will serve as a microcosm of Global Pentecostalism.

Three categories will be used to present elements of this Profile and Paradigm of “Criollo” Pentecostalism. In my study of Pentecostalism they represent key elements that both describe “Criollo” Pentecostalism and account for its proliferation. These elements cut across psychological, socio-political, cultural, religious and theological lines. Furthermore, they represent my belief that multiple and cumulative social-spiritual causations best defines or explains Pentecostal growth.

The three elements or three “P” are: Presence, Popular Classes, and Primal Spirituality.

## **I. Presence: Pentecostalism as an Urban Phenomena**

Several years ago while on a trip to Brazil I was impressed, time and again, by two common scenes in the “favelas” (slums) of Rio de Janeiro. One was the presence of many children flying kites, and the other, by the many Assembléia de Deus (Assemblies of God) churches. To me they both spoke loudly of hope amidst an urban context defined by marginality and poverty. It also spoke to me about the important role Pentecostalism has

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<sup>6</sup> Juan Sepúlveda, “Reflections on the Pentecostal Contribution to the Mission of the Church in Latin America,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1, (1992), p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> Carmelo E. Alvarez, “Panorama Histórico de los Pentecostalismos Latinoamericanos y Caribeños,” *En la Fuerza del Espíritu: Los Pentecostales en América Latina: un desafío a las iglesias históricas* (AIPRAL y CELEP, 1995), pp. 37-38.



played and is playing in many urban centers of the Americas, particularly its "barrios", "favelas" or ghettos. Pentecostalism is mostly an urban phenomenon. It was born among poor urban workers.

Historically, there has been an ongoing debate as to the genesis of Pentecostalism as a modern religious movement. Some scholars look back to Charles Fox Parham, Topeka, Kansas (1902), others to William Joseph Seymour, the one-eye black pastor of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Los Angeles, California (1906). While still other scholars would emphasize a polycentric development with common roots in the Wesleyan-Holiness, and Keswickian-Reformed revivals of the late nineteenth century. Yet all would agree that as a Movement, Pentecostalism owes its worldwide impetus to the Azusa Street Revival (1906-1909) under Seymour in urban Los Angeles.

It's important to note that the Azusa Street revival drew a significant number of Hispanics living in the Los Angeles area. The names of Luis Lopez and Juan Navarro are noted as early participants of the Azusa Street revival, thus among the first Pentecostals. As early as 1912, Hispanics were organizing their own independent Pentecostal churches throughout the major cities of California, Texas, and Hawaii.<sup>8</sup>

In Latin America, from its beginning in the pioneering work of Willis C. Hoover in Valparaiso and Santiago, Chile (1906-09), or Luigi Francescon in Saulo Paulo, Brazil (1909) to Francisco Olazábal in Victoria, Texas (1923), and Juan Lugo in Ponce, Puerto Rico (1916), and both in New York City in the 1920's, the *locus* of Pentecostalism has been in the urban centers of the Americas.

Pentecostalism's growth has paralleled the phenomenon of urbanization throughout the Americas. Its growth reflects the growth of many of its cities. Mark Searing's research data paint the following portrait:

Between 1950 and 1990, the urban population (in Latin America) increased from 59 million to 306 million... During the same 1950-1985 periods its urban community moved from 40 percent to 67.4 percent, and the percentage of those living in cities of a million people or more escalated from 23 to 31 percent... The greatest growth has been in the very large

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<sup>8</sup> Eldin Villafañe, *The Liberating Spirit*, p. 89.

cities... [though] forty-nine percent of Latin America's population lives in cities of over 100,000."<sup>9</sup>

Brazil is a fascinating example of Pentecostal urban growth. R. Andrew Chestnut, in his excellent work, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty*, notes that among Protestants, "in Brazil's second largest city, Rio de Janeiro, creyentes (believers), the majority of whom (91 percent) are Pentecostal, have founded an average of one church per workday since the beginning of the decade."<sup>10</sup>

It's interesting to note here that the 30 million Pentecostals in Brazil represent 80 percent of all the Pentecostals in Latin America. And that Brazil has the largest population of Catholics in the world (150 million), while at the same time counting the largest Pentecostals in the world.<sup>11</sup> Latin America accounts for 35 percent of all the Pentecostals in the world.<sup>12</sup>

At present "Criollo" Pentecostalism constitute the fastest growing segment of Pentecostalism, due in no small measure to the fact that they are the movement most open to the contextual, cultural, and religious experiences of its urban locality.

While all Pentecostal growth is not limited to its cities, the urban metropolis is the primary *locus* of Pentecostal vitality in the Americas.

## II. Popular Classes: Pentecostalism as Healer of the Pathogens of Poverty.

From its beginning Pentecostalism has been the "haven of the masses."<sup>13</sup> It has thrived among societies' "disinherited."<sup>14</sup> José Miguez Bonino puts it

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Searing, "A Theology of Urban Ministry to Reach: Eye of the Needle People in Latin America," December 2001, unpublished paper.

<sup>10</sup> R. Andrew Chestnut, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit*, p. 309.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 308.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Lalive D'Epinay, *Haven of the Masses: A Study of the Pentecostal Movement in the Churches* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).



this way, "from the 1950 decade on [Pentecostalism has] become the popular face of Protestant Latin America."<sup>15</sup>

Competing paradigms have been offered to explain this attraction of the masses to Pentecostalism. Among the earliest scholarly works one finds Renato Poblete and Thomas F. O'Dea's study, "Anomie and the 'Quest for Community': The Formation of Sects Among the Puerto Ricans of New York" published in 1960.<sup>16</sup> This was a seminal study of Puerto Rican Pentecostal growth in the "barrio", focusing on Emile Durkheim's anomie theory. Poblete and O'Dea's study preceded the better-known and developed works on anomie-theory and Pentecostalism by Emilio Willems (1967), *Followers of the New Faith*,<sup>17</sup> and Christian Lalive D'Epinay's (1969), *Haven of the Masses*.<sup>18</sup>

The anomie thesis posits that Pentecostal growth is due to the dislocation of poor migrants to the city by forces of industrialization, urbanization, and capitalist development. And that the Pentecostal community provides a comprehensive resolution to this anomie state of normlessness or value dissonance in modern society.

Recently, David Stoll (1990)<sup>19</sup> and David Martin (1990)<sup>20</sup> have added to the anomie thesis: political oppression, personal religious identity, the revision of consciousness, and the creation of free social space, as critical factors propelling Pentecostal growth in Latin America.

I believe that while all the above-noted theses are insightful, even necessary for the understanding of "Criollo" Pentecostalism, they are, nevertheless, not sufficient. I reiterate my earlier statement that a better

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<sup>15</sup> José Miguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997); See also, Carmelo Alvarez (ed.), *Pentecostalismo y Liberación: Una experiencia latinoamericana* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial DEI, 1992); Barbara Boudewijnse, André Droogers, and Frans Kamsteeg (editors), *Also Mas Que Opio: Una lectura antropológica del pentecostalismo latinoamericano y caribeño* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial DEI, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Renato Poblete and Thomas F. O'Dea, "Anomie and the 'Quest for Community': The Formation of Sects Among the Puerto Ricans of New York." *American Catholic Sociological Review*, Spring 1960.

<sup>17</sup> Emilio Willems, *Followers of the New Faith* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> Christian Lalive D'Epinay, *Haven of the Masses*.

<sup>19</sup> David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> David Martin, *Tongues of Fire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

understanding of Pentecostalism is to be found in multiple and commutative causations. In this regard I find promising R. Andrew Chestnut's thesis on Pentecostals' growth among the poor.

Chestnut posits, "that the dialectic between poverty-related illness and faith healing provides the key to understanding the appeal of Pentecostalism in Brazil and much of Latin America."<sup>21</sup> He wisely enlarges his concept of illness to include not just somatic maladies, but also social expressions of distress. He thus classifies illness into these categories: physical, social, and supernatural.

Time and space does not permit an elaboration and/or critique of Chestnut's nuanced ethnographic work, but let me just note a few of his important findings:

1. Pentecostalism thrives among the poor because it offers healing to those experiencing the health crisis of poverty.
2. The search for healing is central to the conversion process.
3. Health is maintained through the spiritual and ideological force of their new faith.

Let me quote Chestnut here:

With the instrument of spiritual ecstasy, mutual aid, ideological dualism, and moral ascetism at their disposal, Pentecostals inoculate themselves against many of the diseases of poverty... spiritual ecstasy, experience through the gifts of the Spirit, baptism in the Holy Spirit, and music, allows believers to transcend the material deprivation of their everyday lives. Filled with the power of the Spirit, believers exorcise the demons of poverty.<sup>22</sup>

Chestnut's remarks concerning the "maintenance of health" strategies provided by Pentecostals coheres well with that interpretive understanding that while conditions of deprivation and disorganization may be causal or

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<sup>21</sup> R. Andrew Chestnut, *Born Again in Brazil*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 169-170.



“facilitating conditions” in the genesis of a movement, its development and growth must be sought in the dynamics of the movement itself.<sup>23</sup>

We now turn to Harvey Cox’ notion of Primary Spirituality which I believe moves us further in that direction.

### III. Primal Spirituality: Pentecostalism as a Primal and Postmodern Spirituality

It is Harvey Cox’s thesis that the heart of Pentecostalism, and the key to its growth, lies in what he calls “primal spirituality.” For him primal spirituality responds to the profound spiritual emptiness of our times, and it does so by going beyond the levels of creed and ceremony to touch the core of human religiousness.<sup>24</sup>

He defines primal spirituality as “that largely unprocessed nucleus of psyche in which the unending struggle for a sense of purpose and significance goes on... it is the *imago dei*, the image of God in every person.”<sup>25</sup>

He posits that Pentecostalism enables a recovery, on a personal and communal level, three dimensions of this elemental spirituality. These three dimensions, that touch the heart of what it is to be a *homo religiosus*, are: primal speech, primal piety, and primal hope.

#### A. Primal speech

Primal speech underlines the *glossolalic*, or “ecstatic utterance”, or the praying in the Spirit that speaks from and to the language of the heart. Cox, referring to his teacher Paul Tillich’s writings, defines this ecstasy, “as not an irrational state,” but as “a way of knowing that transcends everyday awareness, one in which ‘deep speaks to deep’.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> see, Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hinse, “Five factors crucial to the growth and spread of a modern religious movement”. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 7 (Spring 1968), p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1995), p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

In my own study of this primal speech I call it the “Salsa of the Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> I agree with Frank Macchia that, “*glossolalia* is a hidden protest against any attempt to define, manipulate or oppress humanity. *Glossolalia* is an unclassifiable, free speech in response to an unclassifiable, free God, that is according to Kasemann, ‘a cry for freedom’.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, I see tongues (*glossolalia*) theologically as a sigh and sign of Liberation, witnessing in the Latino “barrios” the cry for liberation and justice. As such, I suggest seven ways in which tongues are signs of Liberation in the poverty-stricken barrios of the Bronx or of Latin America.

Tongues are:

1. Signs of confirmation that God is present with the poor and oppressed.
2. Signs of divine value of the person—no matter who he or she is.
3. Signs of divine affirmation of women, children, youth and the elderly. As Acts 2:7 reminds us, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.”
4. Signs of the voice of the voiceless in society.
5. Signs of equality/egalitarianism that should exist among God’s people. Because of the leveling of the *glossolalic* experience, all can receive a “word” from the Lord; “calling”, “ministry”, “leadership” as well as “theology” is not the province of an elite.
6. Signs of the prophetic and priestly role of the people of God.
7. Signs of eschatological hope.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Eldin Villafañe, “‘Salsa’ Christianity: Reflections on the Latino Church in the Barrio,” in *A Prayer for the City: Further Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Austin, TX: AETH, 2001), pp. 35-51.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Macchia, “Sighs Too Deep for Words: Towards a Theology of Glossolalia,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992), p. 52; for an excellent scientific study on *glossolalia*, see, H. Newton Maloney and A. Adams Lovekin, *Glossolalia: Behavioral Science Perspective on Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1985.

<sup>29</sup> Eldin Villafañe, *A Prayer for the City*. pp. 48-49.



## B. Primal Piety

By primal piety Cox notes the archetypal religious expressions that have emerge in Pentecostalism, such as healing, dreams, visions, trance, and dance. These are seen as primeval modes of praise and supplication manifested in Pentecostal worship services.

This primal piety is strikingly expressed in the *culto* (worship service) of "Criollo" Pentecostalism, which is a highly participatory "fiesta" (celebration). As Orlando Costas notes, "the Pentecostal *culto* is spontaneous, creative, and intensely participatory."<sup>30</sup>

In the Pentecostal *culto* indigenous musical instruments are used, autochthonous "coritos" are sung, and time is subject to the "event" of the *culto* and not necessary to a fixed structure timetable. It is a spirituality whose creedal statement is not to be found written and read in the *culto*, but one that is verbally given in "testimonios" (testimonies, given its repetitive structure) and in sermon. Both are in essence authentic creeds and theological confessions of faith.

Although, a significant theological paradigm informing most "Criollo" Pentecostal churches is to be found in the "full gospel" or fourfold theological pattern: Jesus Saves, baptizes in the Holy Spirit, heals and will come again. These four Christological themes define a basic gestalt of Pentecostal thought and ethos.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, I contend that the *culto* is the central expression of "Criollo" Spirituality and implicit theology, thus the *locus theologicus* of any would be Pentecostal theology.<sup>32</sup>

To Cox's noted archetypal religious expressions one needs to add those that Steven Land calls the psychomotor activities manifested in the Pentecostal *culto*. These reflect spirit-body correspondence present as: (1) raising hands in praise, clapping to the Glory of God, and extending the right hand of fellowship or joining hands to pray; (2) dancing in the Spirit or

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<sup>30</sup> Eldin Villafañe, *The Liberating Spirit*. P. 129.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> Eldin Villafañe, "Hispanic Spirituality and Indigenous Pentecostal Theology," *The Liberating Spirit*, pp. 110-132; see also, Samuel Solivan, *The Spirit, Pathos, and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

swaying in the “wind” of the Spirit—a form of liturgical dancing; (3) slain in the Spirit, that is to be prostrated on ones back, overcome by the holy presence of God, called euphemistically by Charismatics, “resting in the Spirit”, (4) spontaneous Jericho march, that is marching around—usually inside—the church, symbolizing the falling of walls of oppression or resistance; and (5) divine healing, through the laying on of hands, and anointing with oil.<sup>33</sup>

And of course, one needs to add what Russell Spittler calls sacred expletives—Joyful exclamations, such as “Gloria a Dios”, “Cristo Vive”, “Alelujah”, “Amén”, etc.

Pentecostal spirituality not only touches deeply the primal piety of the person, but also by its very nature—its emphasis on the affections, “testimonios” (stories), and transrational or suprarational—it appeals powerfully to the postmodern mindset.

### C. Primal Hope

Primal hope points to the future. It is Pentecostalism’s eschatological hope. A mostly millennial outlook that “insist that a radically new world age is about to dawn.”<sup>34</sup>

It is also a hope that informs the quest for a world delivered from racism, sexism, violence, poverty and oppression. One, though, that in most Pentecostal cultural-logic gets resolved, some would say dissipated, in the exuberant *culto*, and its emotional catharsis. Although, there are signs of a significant number of leaders and thinkers that see the eschatological hope as a powerful critique of all absolutist socio-political structures that dehumanize.

It is important to also note that this primal hope imbues each *culto* with the expectation of the presence of the Spirit to manifest himself in a real and powerful way.

As Richard Shaul so eloquently puts it:

People for whom the world has been a prison, many of whom are living, in a sense, on their own ‘death row’, facing total deprivation and abandonment, enter through the Spirit, into

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<sup>33</sup> Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> Harvey Co, *Fire from Heaven*, p. 82.



another realm. They find themselves in another world, an open world, in which the gates of this prison have been unlocked. It is a world in which the sick are being healed, broken families restored, broken lives put together again, and desperate economic situation often change... concrete indication that the reign of God is already breaking into the present.<sup>35</sup>

I conclude with some commentary, on what could be called a fourth “P” for “Perils”; although, in reality they are challenges. At the dawn of a new millennium, “Criollo” Pentecostalism faces many challenges. Chief among these are: (1) The role of women in ministry; (2) The place of “tongues” (the debate about initial sign of the Spirit’s baptism); (3) Eschatology (the challenge to dispensational theologies’ hegemony); (4) Ecumenism (level of participation, and charges of proselytism); (5) Legalism and the second “mestizaje” (the second and third generations’ lifestyle/holiness); (6) A movement from a community ethic to a social ethic (one consistent with the understanding of the “Liberating Spirit” and Justice—which raises the question of the level of political participation); (7) Seduction by a “prosperity gospel” and materialism; and (8) Leadership development (developing a Pentecostal theology and ethic that is biblical, and coheres with its best traditional expressions, and consistent with its experience of the Spirit). This means the need to develop a new cadre of theologically educated leaders with solid Pentecostal identity, ecumenical spirit, and ready to meet the challenges of a postmodern world.

## Resumen

*El autor examina el crecimiento del movimiento pentecostal, particularmente entre los hispanos. El artículo traza los elementos claves del movimiento y explorando las razones por su dramático crecimiento, delineando tres características primales del movimiento, las cuales el presenta como las tres “P”s de presencia, base popular, y espiritualidad primal. La presencia se manifiesta particularmente en las áreas urbanas, mientras que su característica popular se manifiesta como un antígeno a la pobreza y como base para una religión popular protestante, y la espiritualidad primal en su lenguaje, piedad, y esperanza. El artículo concluye con una última “P” sobre el peligro o retos a los cuales el pentecostalismo debe de enfrentarse.*

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Shaul, “Salvation: A New Experience of Liberation for the Poor,” in Richard Shaul and Waldo Cesar, *Pentecostalism and the Future of the Christian Churches: Promises, Limitations, Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 153.

# **Victory Outreach International: A Case Study in Holistic Hispanic Ministry**

*Daniel A. Rodriguez*

## **Introduction**

Since it began in 1967, Victory Outreach International (VOI) has planted more than 250 inner-city churches that thrive and transform broken lives in underserved, poverty-stricken, drug and gang-infested neighborhoods. What many people do not know is that VOI has been especially successful reaching and equipping second and third generation U.S. Hispanics for mission to and from the barrio. Hispanics born and raised on the mean streets of cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago serve as pastors in the overwhelming majority of Victory Outreach churches worldwide. This study seeks to provide evidence for the claim made by Catholic sociologist and theologian Allan Figueroa Deck (1994) that there is an affinity between Hispanic popular Catholicism and Pentecostal Christianity that attracts growing numbers of Hispanics from their ancestral church to those like VOI.

Based upon participant observations and interviews as well as official publications of VOI, the first part of this study will provide the reader with a brief introduction to this pioneering inner-city ministry. The second half of the paper seeks to provide an explanation for the phenomenal success VOI has enjoyed reaching U.S. Hispanics.

## **Celebrating 35 Years of Restored Lives**

According to the official website, "It started with a simple God-given vision." Enlist and empower the worst the inner city has to offer to become their best for the glory of God. The bold purpose of Victory Outreach is to lead drug addicts, gang members and prostitutes off of the street and into productive lives that proclaim the life-transforming power of Jesus Christ. Now, 35 years after a humble beginning in East Los Angeles, Victory Outreach (VO) has become an international inner-city ministry phenomenon. Information available on their official website suggests that every year over 10,000 drug addicts go through their intensive rehab program. Their radical life-changing approach gives new hope to thousands of hopeless souls every year. Countless lives have been transformed from the hell of addiction, broken families, gang violence and self-destructive behavior to a life of



dignity, purpose and joy. In 2002, they celebrate 35 years of restored lives. It's a legacy that began when one life was changed and created a worldwide revolution for good in the barrios and ghettos of America and the world.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Legacy of Sonny Arguinzoni**

Sonny Arguinzoni, the founder of Victory Outreach International (VOI) was born in New York to Puerto Rican parents in 1938. At the age of 12 Arguinzoni joined a gang. Soon he began experimenting with pills and marijuana and according to his autobiography, by the age of 15 was hooked on heroin. He stayed hooked on heroin for the next six years, during which time he found himself in and out of jail, including a stint at the penitentiary on Rikers Island. After he was released from prison, he came into contact with ex-gang member Nicky Cruz and Pentecostal street-preacher David Wilkerson, founder of Teen Challenge and author of *The Cross and the Switchblade*. Through their evangelistic efforts Arguinzoni was miraculously cured of his heroin addiction and converted to Christ (Arguinzoni 1987:8-90).

After successfully participating in David Wilkerson's rehab program in New York City, Arguinzoni felt called to the ministry. In 1962 he left New York to attend the Latin American Bible Institute (LABI) of the Assemblies of God in La Puente, California. While in Bible College, Sonny began working with Teen Challenge in Los Angeles. During this time he also met and married Julie Rivera who was also a student at LABI. After recognizing that most ex-drug addicts and gang members did not "fit in" or were not welcomed in the typical Protestant churches of the day, Sonny felt called by God to start a church for people rejected by the larger society and the traditional evangelical churches (Arguinzoni 1987:92-137).

In 1967 Arguinzoni and his small band of disciples purchased a small church in the Boyle Heights section of East Los Angeles and began what was then called "Victory Temple Addicts Church." Since 1967 Victory Outreach has grown from a single church to more than 250 churches and over 350 rehabilitation homes throughout the U.S., Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. In addition to leading VOI, Pastor Sonny Arguinzoni has written an

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<sup>1</sup> See VOI official website: <http://www.victoryoutreach.org/Info/default.asp>.

autobiography,<sup>2</sup> an anecdotal history of the denomination,<sup>3</sup> and his philosophy and vision of ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Today, Victory Outreach International continues its vibrant outreach to those who often have nowhere else to turn. Over 40,000 people attend services each Sunday at one of 250 Victory Outreach churches. The mother church in La Puente, California now led by Sonny Arguinzoni Jr. has over 4,000 thousand members.<sup>5</sup> Internationally, Victory Outreach has centers in 18 countries from Brazil to Ireland to Nigeria. Their success rate is phenomenal. Seven out of ten drug addicts who go through their boot-camp-like program kick their habit for good.<sup>6</sup> But, this is only the beginning.

### **More Than A Drug-Rehab Program**

Since 1967, Victory Outreach has been creating a “legacy of hope” for thousands trapped in drug addiction, prostitution and the gang lifestyle. But Victory Outreach is much more than drug rehabilitation programs or gang-prevention programs. They are now training a new generation of committed young people who have never been drug users, yet have a burden to serve the inner cities. “God’s Anointed Now Generation” or G.A.N.G. is a revolutionary, faith-based approach to getting teens and young adults away from the mindless destruction of street gangs. More than a simple youth ministry, G.A.N.G. challenges teens to do great things for God and for VO.<sup>7</sup>

In 1994 VOI launched the first of several “Urban Training Centers” (UTC) to provide extensive one-and two-year training programs for young adults wanting to go into full-time ministry. Many of those involved in

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<sup>2</sup> Sonny (1987) was originally printed under the titles *God’s Junkie* and *Once a Junkie*.

<sup>3</sup> *Treasures Out of Darkness* (2000a) was co-authored by Sonny and Julie Arguinzoni. The first edition appeared in 1991. Nicky Cruz, long-time friend of Pastor Sonny has written a sympathetic anecdotal history of VOI entitled *Give Me Back My Dignity* (1993).

<sup>4</sup> *Internalizing the Vision* (1995) was written to help members “catch the vision” of VOI.

<sup>5</sup> While most VOI churches tend to be between 100 and 300 members, some are quite large. For instance, VO churches in San Diego and San Jose, California have more than 1000 members.

<sup>6</sup> See VOI official website: <http://www.victoryoutreach.org/Info/default.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> VOI publishes *G.A.N.G. Life Magazine*.



G.A.N.G. and the UTC's are the children of ex-addicts converted through VO. Many of these young men and women have gone on to start group recovery homes, drug treatment centers, urban intervention programs, churches, prison visitation outreaches and family counseling centers. The "second generation" as they are often referred to, is infusing VOI with new energy and modern methods to reach the lost in the world's inner cities.

Under the leadership of Pastor Sonny and the elders of VOI, "Mighty Men of Valor" and "United Women in Ministry" were developed to help people live out their unique purpose as men and women before God. A kind of world-wide-support group, these programs equip and empower men and women to better serve God, their churches and communities.

In response to the need for more formal training for pastors and evangelists, "Victory Outreach International Bible Institute" (formally "Victory Outreach School of Ministry") was started in 1984 to provide more in-depth biblical, spiritual and theological training. VOI Bible Institute has joined hands with Latin American Bible Institute and Azusa Pacific University to provide expanded training for those wishing to go into full-time ministry.

With a vision to establish Victory Outreach in every major city in the world, members are encouraged to join "United We Can." United We Can members commit to give one dollar a day to VOI and its world wide efforts to help people from all walks of life discover the liberating power and love of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Today Victory Outreach is a comprehensive outreach and discipleship ministry that spans the globe, serving holistically in the name of Jesus. This is clearly evident in the movement's mission statement:

Victory Outreach is an international church-oriented Christian ministry called to the task of evangelizing and discipling the hurting people of the world with the message of hope and plan of Jesus Christ.

This call involves a commitment to plant and develop churches, rehabilitation homes and training centers in strategic cities of the world.

Victory Outreach inspires and instills within people the desire to fulfill their potential in life with a sense of dignity, belonging and destiny.

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<sup>8</sup> See the official VOI website: <http://www.victoryoutreach.org/Info/default.asp>.

Victory Outreach works cooperatively with others of mutual purpose in accomplishing the task before us.<sup>9</sup>

## Recognition for a Job Well Done

Not too long ago, people were referring to Victory Outreach as the best-kept secret in America. But this is no longer the case. James K. Hahn, mayor of Los Angeles recently commended Pastor Sonny and VOI for their ongoing effort and commitment to the challenged youth of the community. Similarly, Gray Davis, governor of California and U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein acknowledged VOI for its commitment to combating drug addiction and gang violence in the state's urban communities. And in anticipation of Victory Outreach's 35th anniversary, President George W. Bush sent Pastor Sonny a special note thanking him for his involvement and support with the mission of making this country a better place to live.

John Ashcroft, Attorney General of the United States stated it well in a letter to Sonny Arguinizoni expressing his appreciation for the efforts of VOI. "Your vision and your sacrifice over the past several years has brought Victory Outreach from a small beginning to a world-wide organization reaching millions of people all across America and around the globe. Thanks to you and all the members of Victory Outreach for meeting the needs of so many. You are touching and transforming lives in a manner that government simply cannot duplicate" (<http://www.victoryoutreach.org/Endorsements/>).<sup>10</sup>

Pastor Sonny and VOI continue to see opportunities abounding. At the beginning of the New Millennium, VO pastor and elder Ed Morales declared, "The barrios and ghettos have already been given to us!"<sup>11</sup> The United Nations, Australian Parliament and the Philippine Government have recently asked VOI for help validating Pastor Ed's claim. New Victory Outreach churches and rehabilitation homes are opening every year in cities across America and abroad. As Art Blajos has observed, VOI seems poised to take

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<sup>9</sup> See the official VOI website: <http://www.victoryoutreach.org/info/Values.asp>.

<sup>10</sup> VOI has its critics including former pastors and members, some of whom publicly criticize the movement for abuses at both the local and corporate level. See Scott Glover, "Casting a Critical Eye on Church of Castoffs" in the *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> From a video-recorded message delivered during the VOI World Conference at the Long Beach Convention Center (8/25/00).



their message of Good News to the violent, drug-infested corners of the world and rescue "hidden treasures out of darkness" (1996:197).

### **Born in East LA**

VOI is unique in that it specifically targets the inner city, drug addicts, ex-prisoners, gang members, alcoholics, homosexuals, prostitutes, and other social outcasts (Espinosa 2002:331-332). As one might expect, VOI is a multi-ethnic and interracial movement. However, one of the first things an outside observer would notice is that the majority of its members are second and third-generation Hispanics. While VOI resists referring to itself as a Hispanic, Latino or Chicano church, the demographics, including the overwhelming number of Hispanic pastors throughout the movement cannot be easily overlooked. For example, seven of the denomination's eight elders, including Pastor Sonny are Latinos as are 75 percent of the 39 regional pastors. And if the demographics of the graduates of the UTC are any indication, leadership at VOI will continue to be dominated by Latinos.<sup>12</sup>

Ed Morales, an ex-drug addict and pastor of the thriving VO church in San Jose insists that even though VO was "born in East LA," the largest Latino neighborhood in the United States, VO is not "just a Chicano church or a Latino church." According to Morales, "that's just where the junkies were found."<sup>13</sup> But the Hispanic influence in VOI has not gone unnoticed by scholars. In his dissertation, Luis Daniel Leon (1997) refers to VOI as a "Chicano Pentecostal organization."<sup>14</sup> And in her dissertation investigating the nature of Latino Pentecostal identity, Arlene Sanchez-Walsh (2001) refers to VOI as a "Latino Pentecostal church."

As a third-generation Mexican-American interested in outreach "from the barrio" as well as "to the barrio," the success VOI has enjoyed reaching Latinos in at-risk contexts demands careful analysis. Not surprisingly,

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<sup>12</sup> For example, of the 86 graduates from the UTC in 2000, eighty percent were Latino. The commencement exercise was held at the VOI World Conference 2000 (8/24/02).

<sup>13</sup> From a video-recorded message delivered during the VOI World Conference at the Long Beach Convention Center (8/25/00).

<sup>14</sup> Leon (1997) studied what he termed "religious poetics" or the processes whereby people narrate and perform the symbolic conditions of their worlds with poetic license adjusting them to meet the circumstances of everyday life.

Hispanic Catholics are also trying to understand the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Latinos from their ancestral church.

### **Preaching Christ Enthusiastically**

Bishop Robert González of Boston examined the nature of the message preached by Pentecostal groups that attract large numbers of Latinos. His research question was quite simple: What are they saying? González summarizes what he understands as a message rooted in the Gospel, a message that presents Christ in all His power as the foundation of new life, of conversion, of forgiveness of sins. In his words, "Their preaching seems to be based solely upon the person and power of Christ. They preach the sovereignty of Christ. They preach it enthusiastically, 'whereas we seem to be tired followers of Christ'" (1991:268).

At VO the gospel is not just preached enthusiastically, it is preached boldly. In his book entitled *Internalizing the Vision* (1995), the unofficial ministry manual for VOI, Pastor Sonny yearns for more men and women with initiative, boldness, enthusiasm and vision. "Spreading the Gospel requires boldness. Because of our boldness, we're able to move into the worst neighborhoods of some of the world's roughest cities with aggressiveness and dedication and effectiveness (1995: 76-77).

Rick Alanis, Pastor of an 800-member VO church in San Bernardino, California has launched 16 churches in 16 years. His young pastors are "launched out" to preach boldly and enthusiastically that Jesus Christ has the power to deliver people from life-controlling habits and broken lives. According to Pastor Rick, boldness and enthusiasm flow from the integrity of the messenger. He asks, "How can you preach the message of deliverance if you yourself have not been delivered?"<sup>15</sup> At VO, Christ's liberating power and sovereignty are preached by men and women transformed by that power that are living abundant lives under his rule.

Christine Clinton, who carefully studied VO methods a decade ago made the following observation: "Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the ministry is the radical spirit. People are thankful for their salvation and the change in their lives. God has done everything for them; there is nothing they

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<sup>15</sup> From a video-recorded message delivered during the VOI World Conference at the Long Beach Convention Center (8/26/00).



will not do for God. They want to spend their lives helping others receive the Savior they have" (1992:60). A few years later, former hit man turned VO evangelist Art Blajos recalls never seeing anything like the devotion and enthusiasm of the people at VO (1996:158). The preaching one hears at VO validates González' conclusion that Evangelical and Pentecostal churches that attract Hispanics preach the gospel enthusiastically and boldly, rather than as tired or dutiful followers of Christ (1991:268).

## **An Affinity with Popular Catholicism**

Allan Figueroa Deck (1994), a Jesuit priest and sociologist born and raised in East Los Angeles has raised questions that evangelical Christians cannot afford to ignore, especially if they are serious about reaching the growing number of Hispanics in their own backyards. In an article entitled "The Challenge of Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity to Hispanic Catholicism," Deck provides readers with insights that may help explain why tens of thousands of Hispanics every year leave their ancestral church to join Evangelical and Pentecostal churches like VO. While Deck does not specifically name any particular Evangelical or Pentecostal church, his observations will certainly provide one explanation for the phenomenal success VO has enjoyed in reaching and equipping Hispanics for ministry and missions.

Allan Figueroa Deck argues that the affinity between Hispanic popular Catholicism and Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity is a characteristic that attracts larger number of Latinos. Popular Catholicism<sup>16</sup> is the deeply rooted norm for most Hispanics, the existential Catholicism that is usually mediated by grandmothers and mothers. Communicated orally, popular Catholicism shuns the cognitive in its effort to appeal to the senses and the feelings, which it does through symbol and rite (1994:421-422).<sup>17</sup> Hispanic sociologist Orlando Espin concurs "It can be argued that, first of all, popular Catholicism is the manner in and through which most U.S. Latinos are

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<sup>16</sup> The term "Popular" is used here to differentiate between the official or normative version of Catholicism defined by the specialists.

<sup>17</sup> Novels including *Bless Me*, *Ultima* by Rodolfo Anaya (1972), *Rain of Gold* by Victor Villaseñor (1992) and *So Far from God* by Ana Castillo (1994) weave common elements of popular Catholicism into fascinating stories about life in the U.S. for Hispanics across generational lines.

Catholic; and secondly, that this popular Catholicism is a key matrix of all Hispanic cultures" (1994:313).

The outstanding characteristics of Hispanic popular Catholicism include the following: a concern for an immediate experience with God, a strong orientation toward the transcendent, an implicit belief in miracles, a practical orientation toward healing, and a tendency to personalize or individualize one's relationship with the divine. Deck observes that these qualities are notably absent in American Catholicism and mainline Protestantism. He suggests that this is due to the antagonism between popular religion and modern rationality. Deck laments the fact that Anglo-American Catholics see Hispanic popular religion as a problem to be uprooted, not a strength upon which to build (1994:422).

### **An Immediate Experience with God**

Deck argues that mainline churches, both Roman and Protestant historically promote an elitism that prohibits the masses in the pews from experiencing God immediately and personally (1994:427). This is not the case at Victory Outreach. Luis Daniel Leon writes, "There is a corporal quality to worship in Victory Outreach churches. It is experienced as electric charges and ecstatic trancelike states that assure the believer that God is real and that the believers have tapped the power of God—directly" (1997:353). Leon is making reference to the Pentecostal style of worship typical of VO, where members are regularly anointed with the Holy Spirit manifested by speaking in tongues and falling into peaceful trancelike states. The charismatic leadership of Pastor Sonny reinforces the belief that anyone can tap directly into the power of God.

Pastor Sonny's story, or "testimony" in Pentecostal vernacular, has become what Leon refers to "as the foundational myth for the Victory Outreach cosmos" (1997:335). Arguinzoni's miraculous healing from heroin addiction and calling to establish churches where society's rejects would be accepted, nurtured and released to establish new congregations is the living embodiment of the miraculous power of God. For 35 years VOI has grown by boldly preaching that other men can do the same.

Since 1967, tens of thousands of men and women have become members of what is referred to as the "Lazarus Generation," those who have metaphorically been raised from the dead (Leon 1997:352). In the context of VO, members of the Lazarus Generation were dead in sin as prisoners of what Pastor Sonny calls "life-controlling habits" including drug and alcohol



addiction, prostitution, and the violent urban gang culture (2000a:122). Pastor Sonny's testimony and the testimonies of the Lazarus Generation reinforce the belief that anyone can have what Deck calls "an immediate experience with God" which at VO likely will include divine healing.<sup>18</sup>

### **An Implicit Belief in Miracles**

Father Deck suggests that another characteristic of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches that attract growing numbers of at-risk Hispanics is "an implicit belief in miracles, [and] a practical orientation toward healing" (1994:422). The implicit belief in miracles at VO is reinforced by the living legacy of Pastor Sonny and the Lazarus Generation. The implicit belief in miracles is also reinforced by the priority given to prayer, referred to as the "first form of combat" learned at VO (Blajos 1996:169).

The following comment by a VO pastor's wife, illustrates the importance given to prayer. Thrilled about the "breakthrough" she and her husband were finally experiencing in New York she is quoted as saying to sister Julie Arguinizoni, "I'm amazed at the power that we have in Jesus. All we do is pray, fast, and take the message of the gospel to the neediest drug-infested areas we can find. As we share how Jesus is a living Savior and able to set them free, people respond and are openly accepting Christ" (2000a:270).

Just as Jesus taught his disciples to pray, at VO people are taught to pray, which is usually accompanied with tears, a sign of humility and brokenness before God. In his address at the 1994 VO Rehabilitation Conference in San Jose, California, Pastor Sonny made the following comment: "I think that the responsibility of every [Rehab] Home Director is to pray that the Lord put an appetite within the men and women in our homes. . . an appetite for the things of God" (cf. 2000b:12). In VO drug addicts, gangsters and prostitutes are prayed for and learn to pray from the moment they enter a rehab home because according to Pastor Sonny, "its in the [rehab] Home that you develop an appetite for prayer" (2000b:18).

The insistence that men and women learn to pray is based on faith in a God who continues to work miracles today. In *Treasures Out of Darkness*

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<sup>18</sup> Art Blajos, VO evangelist in London and former hit man for the Mexican Mafia has written a popular testimony entitled *Blood In, Blood Out* (1996). Similar to Pastor Sonny, Blajos miraculously kicked his heroin addiction. Upon his inexplicable release from prison, Blajos was born again at VO.

(2000), the popular autobiography and anecdotal history of VOI, Pastor Sonny states: "Many today have a hard time believing that God still performs miracles. They say that ended centuries ago. I want to tell you that simply isn't so and Victory Outreach is proof positive" (2000a:228). Evangelistic "breakthroughs" are always preceded by prayer, as are special callings and miracles of healing. Miracles, in the form of transformed lives drew Art Blajos to VO when he was released from prison. He recalls, "I saw [VO] had the power to change the lives of people like me" (1996:161).

## **A Personalized Relationship with God**

According to Father Deck, another characteristic of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches that attract growing numbers of Hispanics is "a tendency to personalize or individualize one's relationship with the divine" (1994:422). In VO this is observed most clearly when one listens to pastors describe their call to a specific ministry or city. Pastor Sonny insists, "the first element in the making of a preacher is a divine call" (1995:102). His description of the divine call that led to the founding of Victory Temple Addict's Church in 1967 has become paradigmatic of the intimate relationship with God encouraged and nurtured in VO recovery homes and churches:

I started praying and seeking the Lord asking, "Lord, why is it that I am so confused, why do I feel the way I do? Why is it that I am going through this turmoil?" On the morning of the third day, the Lord spoke to my heart. He said, "The reason that you feel the way you do is because you're out of my will. You are doing my work, but you are still out of my divine will."

"Well, Lord," I asked, "what would you have me to do?"

The Lord answered, "I want you to open up a church. I want to fill it with drug addicts and their families" (2000a:89).

Pastor Sonny plays down the importance of giftedness or formal education when identifying future pastors. Instead, a sure sign that one has been called is the personalized relationship they have with the Lord. "A candidate for leadership visibly gives the testimony that he has a strong spiritual life and strong relationship with Jesus Christ" (1995:80). As one reads the official and popular anecdotal histories or listens to the testimonies of VO leaders, one hears over and over again statements that echo those of



Pastor Sonny. "The Lord was speaking to me, and putting in my heart that he wanted me to open up a church" (2000a:89). "The Spirit of the Lord came upon me and His still, small voice spoke" (2000a:92). Just as Pastor Sonny received a vision for his ministry, those who are "launched out" or "released" must have received a similar vision or calling. The assumption underlying this ministry paradigm is that every believer can and should have an intimate personalized relationship with the Lord, through which one discerns his or her calling.

## Conclusion

Many other explanations for the phenomenal success of VOI remain to be examined. But the fact that VO attracts an unusually larger number of Latinos cannot be denied. This study validates the claim of Catholic sociologist and theologian Allan Figueroa Deck that there is an affinity between Hispanic popular Catholicism and Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity (1995:421-422). Deck argues that Evangelical and Pentecostal churches like VOI will continue to attract many Hispanic Catholics because fundamental characteristics of the ministry paradigm at Pentecostal churches like VO resonate with the spiritual sensibilities of Latinos including the belief that any anyone may enjoy an immediate experience with God, an implicit belief in miracles, a practical orientation toward healing, and a tendency to personalize or individualize one's relationship with the divine.

As stated earlier, these qualities are notably absent in American Catholicism and mainline Protestantism including my own denomination, the Church of Christ. Deck laments the fact that Anglo-American Catholics see Hispanic popular religion as a problem to be uprooted, not a strength upon which to build (1995:422). A careful examination of movements like VOI may cause those interested in effective ministry among and by Hispanics to see Hispanic popular religion as a strength to be built upon rather than as a problem to be uprooted.

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### **Resumen**

*El autor traza la historia del VOI, trazando sus orígenes y labor por medio de entrevistas y documentos. Tomando en cuenta la relación entre el catolicismo popular y la popularidad del pentecostalismo entre hispanos indicado por Figueroa-Deck, el autor provee un examen de la relación del catolicismo popular y este movimiento carismático. El autor identifica varias características del VOI que son atractivas para los hispanos en particular; características como entusiasmo en la predicación, una creencia en milagros, la experiencia inmediata y personal con Dios, y la afinidad con el catolicismo popular. El autor concluye que si hay una afinidad entre las características del VOI y el catolicismo popular que atrae a los hispanos.*



# **An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Elsa Tamez and Ivonne Gebara: Theology and Liberation for Women in Latin America.**

*Angel Santiago-Vendrell*  
*Mi-Soon Im*

The view is commonly held that women have traditionally been oppressed in Third World societies. The case of Latin America is no exception where we find our sisters suffering from a triple oppression because of their gender, poverty, and race. The case of Latin America is somehow unique because the dynamics of oppression can be perceived in a pluralistic society where mixture of races occurred as the process of colonialism. The difference between Latin America and Africa or Asia is a racial hybridity and erotic violence. In this essay, we want to reflect the hermeneutics that Latin American women employed in their theological constructions. We will present the hermeneutics of Elsa Tamez (Protestant) and Ivonne Gebara (Roman Catholic) and identify how both methods have been employed for the liberation of women in Latin America.

Since the arrival of the Europeans to the "New World," excesses of power, violence, torture, and death in Latin America have been witnessed. We have the testimonies of Bartolome de Las Casas and other historians of the time who wrote of great and terrible acts of violence. The un-equal encounter between colonizers and colonized was/is an encounter of power. The abuse against women in times of war is a terrifying experience of torture, rape, and des-humanization. Tzvetan Todorov presents in his famous book, *The Conquest of America*, a moving story of a woman who suffered the terrible consequences of colonialism. A Mayan woman was harassed by a Spaniard colonizer who desired her and wanted to appropriate her body as an object for his passions. The woman refused to concede the desires of the colonizer in his sexual advance. By doing so, the woman chooses to obey her husband and the rules of her own society; she puts all that remains of her personal will into defending the violence of which she has been the object. Her defense against such abuse is successful in one sense. She is not raped. But she suffered a worst destiny. The colonizer in his fury threw the woman to furious dogs and they devoured her into pieces.<sup>1</sup> As this narrative shows,

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<sup>1</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*. New York: Harper Collings Publishing House, 1992.

women have been oppressed and their bodies exoticized in a cruel attempt by men to satisfy their sexual impulses. Ana Maria Bidegain points out, "women were used as the master's sex object, and as the mother who reproduce a labor force for toil in the mines or on the sugar plantations and ranches."<sup>2</sup> Taking into consideration this background information, I want to reflect in the hermeneutics of Latin America's feminist theologians.

Elsa Tamez points out, "cultural violence dates before the colonial period." She argues that to talk about cultural violence against women, we have to do so with critical eyes. Women cannot fall into a naïve attitude of their own culture. Culture is our mother and father, teaching us to articulate life from where we stand, our own reality. Human life is cultural because we are born into it. Culture is the aspirations and communications of what it means to be human, but as human constructions, cultures are also defective and full of in-congruencies. Just as humans can dehumanize themselves, so culture can bear the sinful imprint of its creators in dehumanizing humanity. Tamez points out two myths as forming the basis for cultural violence against women in Latin America. In these myths the imagery of a vagina with teeth appeared as a stumbling block for males that felt less than women and opted to destroy the vaginas. Tamez argues,

in Latin America and the Caribbean, we women of all cultures cannot but recognize that there are myths in our traditions which reflect the violent ways in which women are perceived, simply because they are women, and that legitimized the practices of unequal relationships.<sup>3</sup>

So, sexuality is one of the worst forms of social oppression that women in Latin America had suffered throughout history. Leonora Aida Concha states, "generally, women are sexually harassed not only on the streets, but also by their employers. Women suffer sexual abuse from the time they are little girls" until they marry.<sup>4</sup> This fact shows that the violence portrayed towards women is the product of an unequal understanding of otherness. Then, how

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<sup>2</sup> Ana Maria Bidegain, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," in *Through Her Eyes* (edited by Elsa Tamez) Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 181-186.

<sup>4</sup> Leonora Aida Concha, "The Reality of Women's Oppression in Mexico and Central America," 52.

these Latin American feminist theologians deconstruct and construct new hermeneutics to liberate women of violent oppression?

Elsa Tamez is currently one of the leading voices in the Protestant church of Latin America. She is the President of Seminario Biblico Latinoamericano, and has published numerous books and articles. I will use her article on Hagar to delineate the methodology that she proposes for the liberation of women in Latin America. For Tamez, the Bible plays a central role in the liberation of women. She argues, "all Christians, and especially Christians immersed in the process of liberation, believe that the Bible has a liberating message for life."<sup>5</sup> The Bible becomes a powerful ally in the destruction of oppressive situations affecting women. Tamez's method starts by re-working the events of the Bible which are grounded in particular meanings. These events, which are grounded in the history of Israel can be re-created in situations where its original intentionality had faded. Tamez argues, "they (the texts) are re-read not with the intellectual curiosity to understand the past, but with the need to respond to life situations today. Our present enters and functions as filter, criterion, and light in the search for meaning in biblical texts."<sup>6</sup> Tamez applies this methodology to the story of Hagar, the Egyptian woman slave of Abraham and Sarah.

In the story of Hagar, we are confronted with the injustice of a woman against another woman. One woman is free and barren and the other is a slave and full of life. The story turns complicated because it is the slave woman Hagar who conceived the first-born son to Abraham. Some biblical scholars have argued that this event shows the greatness of God in giving to Abraham a child from a slave woman. It has been said that this event is to show that for God nothing is impossible. Yet, Tamez reverses this interpretation and asks, "But why not say that this happens to reveal to the oppressed peoples of the earth the story of salvation?"<sup>7</sup> Tamez re-reads and re-creates the whole story using the concept of salvation as a key element to understand the God who saves and liberates without exceptions of persons. The marginalized demanded as first-born sons to be included in the history of salvation breaking the orders of things and complicating the process. Salvation is a universal desire of God that is intrinsically related with God's grace and mercy. Hagar's son broke the order of things complicating the

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<sup>5</sup> Elsa Tamez, "The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation," in *New Eyes for Reading* (Geneva: WWC, 1986) 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



human understanding of election in God. In this biblical re-construction, Tamez starts with the text presented in the Bible and move to read it through the Latin American context of women's oppression. She re-creates the whole process of the biblical narrative using the social context from which she does her theological reflection. In this sense, the biblical accounts will guide the hermeneutical process filtering, clarifying, and giving new meanings to the experiences of oppressed women in Latin American. This process of cultural hermeneutics is an attempt to place the daily lives of women that had been rob of their capabilities and aspirations in society and elevate them into a preferential position given them a new place and role. The new place is in the center of decision making and the new role is for them to be subjects of their own destiny.

Ivone Gebara is a Brazilian feminist liberation theologian. She is professor of systematic theology at the Theological Institute in Recife, Brazil and has written numerous articles in Latin American feminist theology. Her hermeneutical approach is different from the one proposed by Elsa Tamez. For Gebara, the starting point of the hermeneutical circle should be the live experience of women. The hermeneutical circle of experience, spirituality, and praxis are interconnected to the doctrine of Mary. Gebara argues, "we think of Mary and Mariology from the viewpoint of liberation theology, we make certain anthropological and hermeneutical assumptions. We base our new thinking about traditional Mariology on them and use them as guidelines."<sup>8</sup> Gebara insists that, in the hermeneutical circle, anthropology should be the starting point of reflection and formulation of new understandings of tradition.

She offers five assumptions in Latin American feminist theology to re-create the story of Mary. The first is a *human-centered anthropology*. This approach does not make a distinction between male and female as revealers and participators of history. She argues, "this anthropology takes into account women's historical activity for the Kingdom, and thus does justice to Mary, to women, in fact, to humanity created in the image and likeness of God."<sup>9</sup> The second assumption is a *single anthropology*. This single anthropology affirms a single human history without divisions. There are not two competing histories, one divine and the other human, but rather it encompasses only one history, human history. A Marian theology is

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<sup>8</sup> Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, "Mary" in *Mysterium Liberationis*. Edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993. 482.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

concerned with the historical events of human existence which transpire in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth. Third, Gebera argues for a *realist anthropology*. In this assumption, objectivity and subjectivity are interrelated creating one reality that does not emphasize one point over the other. It assumes a multiplicity of interpretations, hypothesis, and theories about diverse situations. A *realist anthropology* gives to the study of Mary a concrete support that tries to answer to the mutable condition of human beings.<sup>10</sup> Mary was a human being who enjoyed all the happiness and harshness of life. Therefore, Mary as historical being is always in relation with those who enter in contact with her. Fourth, the assumption of a *multidimensional anthropology* is dictated by human developments. Human beings are complex entities that cannot be define because we are mark by space and time. To be human is a complex reality that tries to explain humanness and its relationship to the world by the limited character of its being. A Marian theology founds in a *multidimensional anthropology* a human-divine foundation that allows it to see with justice and respect the human condition.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it is a *feminist anthropology*, whose meaning is linked to the historical moment in which we are living. It is a historical *kairos* where women have become conscious of their oppression and the possibilities to be active participants in destroying those systems that marginalized them.

One crucial issue of Marian theology is “the question of faith relationships between believers within history and those who “live in God.”<sup>12</sup> This statement points to the eschatological dimension of Marian devotion and the relationship of humans with the divine. Mary is not only a symbol of liberation by her physical and historical life, but she is also a symbol of those who “live in God.” She is the culmination of thing to come because she lives in God. Gebera points out, “Being connected to Mary is evidence of belief in life after death, that is, a belief that human life continues in God, no longer subject to the limitations of history.”<sup>13</sup> Humans are always searching for the transcendent. Immortality or eternal life is a presupposition of many Christians. The “saints” and Mary are symbols and re-presenters of those who had accomplished this precious state. That is why many Roman Catholics believe that the saints or the Virgin are there to help them go

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>12</sup> *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 1987. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.

through life and intercede on their behalf before God. Gebara argues, "Those living in God do not compete with the supplicant, but are simply bestowers of favors and so can pay attention to the problems of whoever comes pleading."<sup>14</sup> More than mere favors, the relationship between those living in history and those who live in God is a relationship that brings life and overcomes the senses of loneliness and despair suffered by humans. They are the cloud of witnesses that the letter of Hebrews reminds us. Because Mary was a woman of sorrows who lived as a saint, we can be sure that she helps those who cry to her in their distress.

In Gebara's hermeneutical circle, the text of the Bible is read in its own context and against the context of the interpreter creating a fusion of horizons. For her, the soul of the text is continually renewed and recreated changing its meaning for different audiences in historical periods. With these assumptions in mind, she recreates the biblical material about Mary and the interpretations of Roman Catholic Tradition. She identifies the dogmas of Mary, the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), the virginity of Mary, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the Assumption of Mary. Even though all these dogmas about Mary are very important in the development of feminist Latin American theology, I want to concentrate on the transformation of symbols in the different virgins giving special attention to the Mexican Brown Virgin, Guadalupe. Gebara points out, "of all the devotions to the virgin Mary in Latin America, the only one that we can say have a supernatural apparition is the Virgin of Guadalupe."<sup>15</sup>

We think that the virgin of Guadalupe is the most venerated virgin in Latin America. We will not comment in the event as such. If it was an actual theophany or not have been discussed in other sources,<sup>16</sup> therefore, we will reflect on the devotion of the people and how they relate to the Brown Lady. Guadalupe is a symbol of faith. Paul Tillich points out, "symbols participate in that to which it points."<sup>17</sup> Also, symbols "open up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us."<sup>18</sup> Symbols are the only way that humans can express the divine. They are created by the individual and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 488.

<sup>16</sup> Stafford Poole, *Our lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Tillich. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957.

42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 43.



collective unconscious of a people and are used as vehicles to reach the unreachable. In this case the event of Guadalupe on Mount Tepeyak is an encounter of faith against faith. The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to an Indian and not to the Spaniards. Her revelation was conceived in the side of the downtrodden and marginalized. She appeared as an Indian woman who was full of beauty and brightness. In this Mariophany, the Virgin reveals herself to the margins, to those who were suffering oppression and distress. In this story, the Virgin speaks the language of the oppressed. She identified herself as one of the oppressed and entered into a covenantal relationship with Juan Diego. So, Guadalupe is not only a symbol of faith, but becomes a symbol of identity. She embraces in herself the humiliated condition of being Indian. She is also a political symbol used by Cesar Chavez in his reformation of class struggles in Mexico. As a political symbol she participates in the lives of the poor. She struggles with them for recognition and against the political regimes that oppressed the majority of people in Latin America. She is not a delicate Virgin that waits passively for justice but rather she makes justice happens. One example of this dynamism is when Guadalupe invites Juan Diego to go to the center of power, the Bishop, and orders the Bishop to construct a Temple for her devotion. We think that Guadalupe is not the domesticated Virgin. She is not the abnegated mother, or the docile and submissive woman who waits for a command, rather we see her as a Virgin warrior that brings liberation through her beauty and fury.

In this reflection paper, we have presented two hermeneutical approaches used by feminist theologians in Latin America. We see both approaches as sources of liberation for Latin American women. The Bible as a source of liberation is unquestionably one of the best tools for feminist theology. Elsa Tamez in her hermeneutics proposes a reading of the Bible that is liberating for Latin American women. She presented the story of Hagar as a story where the roles established by society are changed by the God of inclusion and liberation. Her hermeneutics of suspicion starts with the biblical text, then she moves to the present social context, and finally to a reconstruction of theological formulations for the present. This approach of reading the Bible in a liberationist perspective not only brings hope and joy but also the courage to struggle to be free. But, we must be aware of the warnings of Marcella Althaus-Reid when she uncovers the problems of textual authority. She points out, "even if feminist hermeneutics has made a tremendous contribution to the cause of liberation, we may have reached full circle if we

cannot do theology leaving the pattern of text-authority aside.”<sup>19</sup> The biblical text should serve as a guideline along the journey. It should inspire new readings and new interpretations that will challenge the establish norms of the patriarchal system.

The hermeneutic of Ivone Gebara starts with an anthropological understanding of theology. Gebara historicize the symbol of Mary giving it a concrete context in the lives of oppressed women in Latin America. For her, Mary is a historical symbol of liberation because she was a human being who suffered all the vicissitudes of life but overcame history and now she lives in God. The anthropological approach helps us to historicize Mary and at the same time opens the doors of our imagination to reflect of a historical being that now lives in the presence of God. Because the approach centers on the life experiences of women, the Bible takes a secondary place in Gebara’s hermeneutics. The biblical text should create in those who read it a suspicion of all the things that were lost, or even those things that were consciously omitted. Gebara reminds us that a writing text is always selective in what it presents and because the text is always selective we should be critical of it. In this sense, the popular devotions of Latin American women will be the primary source in constructing a hermeneutics of liberation.

The popular devotions of Latin American women will also enlarged the historical imagination of symbols by the creation of new images to refer to the divine. This can be seen in the devotion of other Virgins in Latin America. We presented the example of the Virgin of Guadalupe who is a multidimensional symbol of meanings. She is the co-creator of a new people in Latin America. Guadalupe is a symbol of identity, hope, liberation, struggle, and faith for thousands of people in Latin America.

Elsa Tamez and Ivone Gebara are two examples of feminist theologians trying to formulate hermeneutical theories for the liberation of women in Latin America. They are theologians that we admire and respect for their efforts in the liberation of oppressed women in their countries. Even though they differ in the symbols used to express the divine; they agree in that the final goal of any theological construction is to bring liberation to those women that live under oppressive circumstances.

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<sup>19</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid. “Outing Theology: Thinking Christianity out of the Church Closet,” *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001) 62.

## **Resumen**

*Los autores presentan un examen de la hermenéutica y metodología de dos teólogas feministas de América Latina, Elsa Tamez y Ivonne Gebara. El artículo traza las características principales, símbolos, y teleología de las dos, concluyendo que aunque sus símbolos y forma de expresar lo divino no son idénticos, sus metas de liberación tiene muchas características en común.*



Samuel Pagán, el prolífico hebraísta e intérprete bíblico, nos sorprende con una sólida introducción a la literatura hebrea encontrada en las cuevas de Qumrán. Este libro es producto tanto de una vida dedicada al estudio bíblico como de una reciente sabática en Palestina. El mismo sólo podría haber sido escrito por una persona con un dominio tan completo del hebreo como el del Dr. Pagán.

El libro tiene dos propósitos básicos. Por un lado, ofrece una introducción completa al tema de los rollos del Mar Muerto y de la comunidad que los produjo. Por otro, exhorta a la comunidad cristiana a estudiar estos hallazgos y a ponderar su impacto para la teología cristiana.

El volumen comienza con un ameno prólogo escrito por Luis Rivera Pagán. Le sigue un prefacio donde Pagán explica el propósito del libro. Después, ofrece nueve capítulos sobre el tema. El primero es un recuento histórico del hallazgo de los documentos en las cuevas de los montes que bordean el Mar Muerto. El segundo presenta las teorías mejor documentadas sobre los orígenes y el desarrollo de los esenios, la secta que habitó las cuevas y el complejo de edificios de Qumrán. El tercero examina el concepto de Dios que se desprende de los documentos. El cuarto analiza la escatología de los documentos, resaltando la influencia del dualismo persa en la teología qumranita. El quinto ofrece una detallada discusión de los cuatro tipos de manuscritos encontrados en las cuevas: textos bíblicos, deuterocanónicos, pseudoepigráficos, y sectarios. El sexto afirma la presencia de la mujer en las comunidades esenias, en contra de las teorías que describían a Qumrán como una comunidad monástica. El séptimo comienza a explorar el impacto de los textos para los estudios de la Biblia Hebrea, ya que en Qumrán se encontraron copias o fragmentos de casi todos los libros que componen lo que los cristianos llaman el Antiguo Testamento. Este capítulo ofrece ejemplos concretos del impacto de estos documentos para la traducción e interpretación de la Biblia. El octavo capítulo esboza el impacto de los documentos qumranitas en la teología cristiana. Finalmente, el noveno capítulo ofrece una bibliografía selecta sobre el tema.

Pagán demuestra conocer bien los documentos del Mar Muerto, ofreciendo en ocasiones sus propias traducciones. Conoce, además, la obra de aquellos eruditos que se han destacado por su trabajo sobre los documentos. Por ejemplo, cita continuamente la obra de Delcor, Vermes, y

De Vaux. En español, trabaja sobre la obra de García Martínez y de la de Jiménez y Bonhomme.

En nuestra opinión, Pagán ha logrado conseguir su objetivo de presentar una introducción completa, aunque breve, al difícil tema de la comunidad esenia y los manuscritos de Qumrán. Si el libro tiene un defecto es precisamente su brevedad, pues esboza temas que no trata a profundidad. En particular, nos hubiera gustado que el octavo capítulo, que habla sobre el impacto de los documentos qumranitas en la fe cristiana, fuera un tanto más largo, colocando citas de textos neotestamentarios a la par de los textos esenios. Sin embargo, el libro tiene la virtud de preparar al lector para estudiar libros más complejos, que tratan los temas con mayor detalle. El libro es, pues, el comienzo, no el fin del estudio del tema.

Finalmente, afirmamos que *El misterio revelado* es un libro particularmente útil para aquellos maestros y maestras de Biblia—tanto a nivel de colegio bíblico como de seminario—que desean exponer a sus estudiantes a la literatura extrabíblica. Recomendamos el mismo con entusiasmo como libro de texto para cursos sobre el período intertestamentario y como material de apoyo para cursos de introductorias al Nuevo Testamento.



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